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Immediate Emancipation a War Measure!

SPEECH

OF

HON. CHARLES SUMNER,
OF MASSACHUSETTS,

ON

THE BILL PROVIDING FOR EMANCIPATION IN MISSOURI.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES, FEBRUARY 12TH, 1863.

Mr. SUMNER. Mr. President, if I speak tardily in this debate I hope for the indulgence of the Senate. Had I been able to speak earlier I should have spoken; but, though present in the Chamber, and voting when this subject was under consideration formerly, I was at the time too much of an invalid to take an active part in the proceedings. In justice to myself and to the great question under consideration I cannot be silent.

I have already voted to give \$20,000,000 to Missouri, in order to secure freedom at once to her slaves and to make her at once a free State. I am ready to vote more, if more be needed for this purpose; but I will not vote money to be sunk and lost in an uncertain scheme of prospective emancipation, where freedom is a jack-o'-lantern, and the only certainty is to be found in the congressional appropriation. For money paid down, freedom, too, must be paid down.

Notwithstanding all differences of opinion on this important question, there is much occasion for congratulation in the progress that has been made.

There is one point on which the Senate is substantially united. A large majority will vote for emancipation. This is much, both as a sign of the present and a prophecy for the future. A large majority, in the name of Congress, will offer pecuniary aid to this object. This is a further sign and prophecy. Such a vote, and such an appropriation, will constitute an epoch. Only a few short years ago the very mention of slavery in Congress was forbidden, and all discussion of it was stifled. Now, emancipation is an accepted watchword, while slavery is openly denounced as a guilty thing worthy of death.

It is admitted that now, under the exigency of war, the United States ought to co-operate with any State in the abolition of slavery, giving to it pecuniary aid; and

it is proposed to apply this principle practically in Missouri. It was fit that emancipation, destined to end the rebellion, should first begin in South Carolina, where the rebellion first began. It is also fit that the action of Congress in behalf of emancipation should first begin in Missouri, which, through the faint-hearted remissness of Congress, as late as 1820, was opened to slavery. Had Congress at that time firmly insisted that Missouri, on entering the Union, should be a free State, the vast appropriation now proposed would have been saved; and, better still, this vaster civil war would have been prevented. The whole country is now paying with treasure and blood for that fatal surrender. Alas! that men should forget that God is bound by no compromise, and that, sooner or later, He will insist that justice shall be done. There is not a dollar spent, and not a life sacrificed, in this calamitous war, which does not plead against any repetition of that wicked folly. Blasted be the tongue which speaks of compromise with slavery!

But, though happily compromise is no longer openly proposed, yet it insinuates itself in this debate. In former times it took the form of bare-faced concession to slavery, as in the admission of Missouri as a slave State; the annexation of Texas as a slave State; the waiver of the prohibition of slavery in the Territories; the atrocious bill for the re-enslavement of fugitives; and the opening of Kansas to slavery, first by the Kansas bill, and then by the Lecompton constitution. In each of these cases there was a concession to slavery which history now records with shame. but it was by this that your wicked slaveholding conspiracy waxed confident and strong, till at last it was ripe for war.

And now it is proposed, as an agency in the suppression of the rebellion, to put an end to slavery. By proclamation of the

President all the slaves in certain States, and designated parts of States, are declared to be free. Of course this proclamation is a war measure, rendered just and necessary by the exigencies of war. As such it is summary and instant in its operation; not prospective or procrastinating. A proclamation of prospective emancipation would have been an absurdity; like a proclamation of prospective battle, where not a blow was to be struck, or a cannon pointed, before 1876, unless, meanwhile, the enemy desired it. What is done in war must be done promptly, except, perhaps, under the policy of defense. Gradualism is delay; and delay is the betrayal of victory. If you would be triumphant, strike quickly. Let your blows be felt at once, without notice or premonition; and especially without time for resistance or debate. Time always deserts those who do not appreciate its value. Strike promptly, and time becomes your invaluable ally. Strike slowly, gradually, prospectively, and time goes over to the enemy.

But every argument for the instant operation of the proclamation; every consideration in favor of dispatch in war, is especially applicable to all that is done by Congress as a war measure. In a period of peace, Congress might fitly consider whether emancipation should be immediate or prospective, and we might listen with patience to the instances adduced by the Senator from Wisconsin [Mr. DOOLITTLE] in favor of delay; to the case of Pennsylvania and to the case of New York, where slaves were tardily admitted to their birthright. Such arguments, though to my judgment of little value at any time, would then be legitimate. But now, when we are considering how to put down the rebellion, they are not even legitimate. There is but one way to put down the rebellion, and that is *instant action*; and all that is done, whether in the field, in the Cabinet, or in Congress, must partake of this character. Whatever is postponed for twenty years, or ten years, may seem to be abstractly politic or wise; but it is in no sense a war measure, nor can it contribute essentially to the suppression of the rebellion.

Now, I think that I may assume, without contradiction, that the proposed tender of money to Missouri for the sake of emancipation is a war measure, to be vindicated as such under the Constitution of the United States. It is also an act of justice to an oppressed race; but it is not in this unquestionable character that it is now commended to Congress. If it were urged on no other ground, even if every consideration of philanthropy and of religion pleaded for it with rarest eloquence, I fear

that it would stand but little chance in either House of Congress. Let us not disguise the truth. Except as a war measure, in order to aid in putting down the rebellion, this proposition would find little hospitality here. Senators are ready to vote money—as the British Parliament voted subsidies—in order to supply the place of soldiers, or to remove a stronghold of the rebellion; all of which is done by emancipation. I do not overstate the case. Slavery is a stronghold of the rebellion, which, through emancipation, will be removed, while every slave and every slave-master will become an ally of the Government. Therefore emancipation is a war measure, as constitutional as the raising of armies or the occupation of a hostile territory.

But in vindicating emancipation as a war measure, we must see that it is made under such conditions as to exercise a present, *instant* influence against the rebellion. It must be immediate, not prospective. In proposing prospective emancipation you propose a measure which can have little or no influence on the war.—Senators abstractly may prefer that emancipation should be prospective rather than immediate; but this is not the time for the exercise of any such abstract preference. Whatever is done as a war measure must be immediate, or it will cease to have this character. If made prospective, it will not be a war measure, whatever you may call it.

If I am correct in this statement—and I do not see how it can be questioned—then is the appropriation for immediate emancipation just and proper under the Constitution, while that for prospective emancipation is without any sanction, except what it may find in the sentiments of justice and humanity.

It is proposed to vote \$10,000,000 of money to promote emancipation ten years from now. Perhaps I am sanguine, but I cannot doubt that before the expiration of that period slavery will die in Missouri under the awakened judgment of the people, even without the action of Congress. If our resources were infinite, we might tender this large sum by way of experiment; but with a Treasury drained to the bottom, and with a debt accumulating in fabulous proportions, I do not understand how we can vote millions, which, in the first place, will be of little or no service in the suppression of the rebellion, and, in the second place, which will be simply a largess in no way essential to the subversion of slavery.

Whatever is given for immediate emancipation is given for the national defense, and for the safety and glory of the Republic.

lie. It will be a blow at the rebellion.—Whatever is given for prospective emancipation will be a gratuity to slaveholders and a tribute to slavery. Pardon me if I repeat what I have already said in this debate, “millions for defense, but not a cent for tribute;” millions for defense against peril from whatever quarter it may come; but not a cent for tribute in any quarter, especially not a cent for tribute to the loathsome tyranny of slavery.

I know it is sometimes said that even prospective emancipation will help to weaken the rebellion. That it will impair the confidence in slavery and also its value, I cannot doubt; but it is equally clear that it will leave slavery still alive and on its legs, and just so long as this is the case there must be controversy and debate with attending weakness; while reaction will perpetually lift its crest. Instead of tranquility, which we all seek for Missouri, we shall have contention. Instead of peace we shall have prolonged war. Every year's delay, ay, sir, every week's delay in dealing death to slavery leaves just so much of opportunity to the rebellion; for so long as slavery is allowed to exist in Missouri the rebellion will still struggle, not without hope for its ancient mastery. But let slavery cease at once and all this will be changed. There will be no room for controversy or debate with its attending weakness, nor can reaction lift its crest.—There will be no opportunity to the rebellion, which must cease all efforts there, when Missouri can no longer be a slave State. Freedom will become our watchful, generous, and invincible ally, while the well-being, the happiness, the repose, and the renown of Missouri will be established forever.

Thus far, sir, I have presented the argument on grounds peculiar to this case; and here I might stop. Having shown that, as a military necessity, and for the sake of that economy which it is our duty to cultivate, emancipation must be immediate. I need not go further; but I do not content myself here. The whole question is open between immediate emancipation and prospective emancipation; or, in other words, between doing right at once and doing it at some distant future day. Procrastination is the thief not only of time, but of virtue itself. But such is the nature of man that he is disposed always to delay, so that he does nothing to-day which he can put off till to-morrow. Perhaps in no single matter has this disposition been more apparent than with regard to slavery. Every consideration of humanity, justice, religion, reason, common sense, and history, all demanded the instant cessation of an intolerable wrong, without procrastination or delay. But hu-

man nature would not yield; and we have been driven to argue the question whether an outrage, asserting property in man, denying the conjugal relation, annulling the parental relation, shutting out human improvement, and robbing its victim of all the fruits of his industry—the whole, in order to compel work without wages—should be stopped instantly or gradually. It is only when we regard slavery in its essential elements, and look at its unutterable and unquestionable atrocity, that we can fully comprehend the mingled folly and wickedness of this question. If it were merely a question of economy, or a question of policy, then the Senate might properly debate whether the change should be instant or gradual; but considerations of economy and policy are all absorbed in the higher claims of justice and humanity. There is no question whether justice and humanity shall be immediate or gradual. Men are to cease at once from wrong doing; they are to obey the Ten Commandments instantly and not gradually.

Senators who argue for prospective emancipation, show themselves insensible to the true character of slavery, or insensible to the requirements of reason. One or the other of these alternatives must be accepted.

Shall property in man be disowned immediately or only prospectively? Reason answers immediately.

Shall the conjugal relation be maintained immediately or only prospectively? Reason recoils from the wicked absurdity of the inquiry.

Shall the parental relation be recognized immediately or only prospectively? Reason is indignant at the question.

Shall the opportunities of knowledge, including the right to read the Book of Life, be opened immediately or prospectively? Reason brands the idea of delay as impious.

Shall the fruits of his own industry be given to a man immediately or prospectively? Reason insists that every man shall have his own without postponement.

And history, thank God! speaking by examples, testifies in conformity with reason. The conclusion is irresistible. If you would contribute to the strength and glory of the United States; if you would bless Missouri; if you would benefit the slave-master; if you would elevate the slave; and still further, if you would afford an example which shall fortify and sanctify the Republic, making it at once citadel and temple, do not put off the day of freedom. In this case, more than in any other, he gives twice who quickly gives.

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